

# Prescription & Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse



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Over \$78 billion in prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are produced each year in the United States. Although most people use these medications properly, many do not. They might take them without a doctor's prescription, use more than prescribed, or take them for reasons other than those for which they were prescribed.

Twenty-one million people over the age of 12 have used one or more psychotherapeutic drugs (stimulants, sedatives, tranquilizers, and analgesics available through prescription) for nonmedical purposes at some time in their lives.

## What Are Some Of The Most Common Medications, Their Uses and Effects?

### **STIMULANTS**

Amphetamines and caffeine are stimulants used primarily to delay the onset of mental and physical fatigue. Students studying long hours for exams, athletes who feel the drugs will improve their performance, and workers who want to stay awake on the job often use stimulants.

These drug compounds are often found in diet pills which, if misused, can lead to anorexia nervosa. Anorexia nervosa is a pathological loss of appetite thought to be psychological in origin that is manifested in extreme dieting and excessive thinness.

Caffeine is also found in many beverages, pain medications, and allergy and cold remedies.

Unusually high doses, or excessive use of stimulants over long periods of time, can lead to anxiety, hallucinations, severe depression, or physical and psychological dependence. From a strong stimulant such as cocaine, to nicotine in cigarettes and caffeine in coffee and cola drinks, stimulants are an intimate part of our lives.

### **ANALGESICS**

Some of the most widely used analgesics, available in both prescription and over-the-counter forms, include:

- **ASPIRIN** - The most common analgesic used today to treat fever, arthritis and pain. Possible side effects can include nausea, heartburn or development of bleeding ulcers.

Reye's syndrome may develop if aspirin is given to children with the flu or chicken pox. This disease is characterized by vomiting, swelling of the brain and liver, difficulty with mental functioning, and can lead to death. People with liver damage should also avoid using aspirin.

- **ACETAMINOPHEN** (Tylenol) is used to treat aches, pains, and fevers and is generally free from side effects. Large doses or overuse of this drug may cause rashes, fevers, or changes in blood composition. People with kidney or liver problems should consult a doctor before using acetaminophen.
- **IBUPROFEN** (Motrin, Advil, Nuprin) is used to relieve pain associated with arthritis, menstrual cramping and discomfort, fever, and muscle strains. Possible side effects might include upset stomach, dizziness, drowsiness, headache, or ringing in the ears. Overuse of this drug may lead to confusion, tingling in hands and feet, and vomiting.

## **ANTIDEPRESSANTS**

These are prescription medications used to treat depression, a disease affecting over 15 million Americans. Some of the original drugs of this group were Nardil, Tofranil and Elavil. Although not technically an antidepressant, lithium (used to treat manic depression), is often in this group.

The side effects of prolonged and excessive use of these drugs are excessive urination or thirst, diarrhea, vomiting, drowsiness, dizziness, or muscle weakness. Some newer antidepressants that show great promise in treating this disease are Wellbutrin, Prozac, and Zoloft. The incidence of side effects with these seem to be less than with the previously used medications.

## **SEDATIVE-HYPNOTICS AND TRANQUILIZERS**

Benzodiazepines are the most widely prescribed tranquilizers and sleep-inducing medications. Drugs used to treat anxiety and tension are Valium, Xanax, Ativan, and Tranxene. Some drugs used for sleeping are Dalamine, Restotril, and Halcion. Possible side effects include drowsiness, poor coordination, or light-headedness. Overuse of these drugs can lead to respiratory difficulties, sleeplessness, coma, and even death.

## **BARBITURATES**

These less commonly prescribed medications are used to treat anxiety and insomnia. Some examples are Seconal, Phenobarbital and Nembutal. If improperly used, these drugs can cause an individual to feel depressed or experience respiratory difficulties.

## **COUGH AND COLD PREPARATIONS**

Colds are caused by viruses and typically last 7 to 10 days. Most cold preparations are designed to treat specific cold symptoms and provide temporary relief from discomfort. Most widely used cold remedies include the following:

- **ANTIHISTAMINES AND DECONGESTANTS** - These medications are typically used to relieve itchy, watery eyes and reduce congestion due to allergies, colds and flu. They can cause drowsiness or excitability.
- **ANTITUSSIVES & EXPECTORANTS** - Antitussives are cough suppressants used to treat painful, persistent coughs. Expectorants are used to help clear mucous from the respiratory system. Both medications may contain alcohol and some may contain narcotics, such as codeine, to relieve pain and induce sleep. Some may be addictive.

Young people may abuse these medications for the effects derived from alcohol use, as the alcohol content in some over-the-counter preparations may be as high as 40 percent.

- **LAXATIVES** - They are among the most widely misused and abused over-the-counter medications. Use of laxatives should be restricted to short term-use for constipation, since chronic use leads to dependency.

## **MISUSE AND DEPENDENCE**

Misuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs can often lead to psychological and physical dependence. People use increased amounts of drugs to ensure a sense of well being while treating unrelated illnesses or health problems, or for nonmedical purposes.

Many medications contain alcohol and narcotics such as codeine, which can be addictive and life threatening. Use of alcohol, a depressant, with some prescription and over-the-counter drugs may inhibit or increase the drug's effectiveness and cause a loss of coordination. Combining over-the-counter drugs with some prescription drugs can cause similar effects, or even more harmful reactions.